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### Deposited in DRO:

27 January 2017

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Smith, J. (2017) 'Target-setting, early-career academic identities and the measurement culture of UK higher education.', Higher education research and development., 36 (3). pp. 597-611.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1288708>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor Francis Group in Higher Education Research Development on 08/03/2017, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/07294360.2017.1288708>.

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# **Target-setting, early-career academic identities and the measurement culture of UK Higher Education**

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Total word count: 6,997.

# Target-setting, early-career academic identities and the measurement culture of UK Higher Education

Early-career academics are subject to a barrage of formal measurements when they secure a first academic post in a UK university. To support this process, guidance is provided by universities on what is measured, though this can lack disciplinary nuance. This article analyses the perceptions of a sample of social scientists of the process of target-setting during their academic probationary periods, showing that the perceived surveillance regime legitimates particular academic identities. I show how, for those who took part in this study, the currently-instantiated competitive UK measurement culture can produce conformative subjects who frustrate institutional rhetoric.

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*I don't think it's too much measurement, but it's bad measurement, it's a shame.*

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Early-career academics (ECAs) are subject to a barrage of measurements when they secure a first academic post in a UK university in response to the surveillance regimes that now form part of the corporatised university environment globally (Lynch, 2010). Targets are set and monitored regularly<sup>1</sup> as new academics strive to establish independent academic identities. What constitutes desirable targets for institutional satisfaction remain opaque to individuals, who turn to generic advice provided by Human Resources Departments that lack disciplinary nuance (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Consideration of the affective dimensions (Clegg, 2008) of a permanent measurement culture (Davies and Petersen, 2005) is now foregrounded in literature on academic identities where care and collegiality (Lynch, 2010) are being superseded by individuation (Macfarlane, 2007) and competitiveness. As Ball (2003: 216) argues, this requires people to perform in material and symbolic ways in response to systems of control and surveillance rooted not in academics' desires but '*institutional self-interest*' (Ball, 2003: 218) as corporatised managerialist imperatives overtake virtuous conceptions (Macfarlane, 2007) of academic service.

Affect is an important dimension of research on contemporary conditions of academic work environments as marketisation privileges a target-setting culture. Shin and Jung (2014) use regression analysis on a large international data-set to categorise national HE systems into high/low job satisfaction and high/low job stress working environments, in which the UK scores poorly. Stensaker (2015) theorises organisational identity as a device to explore university working environments, where brand and marketing focus change at an institutional level. Any university, however, is reliant on the work of its individual academics, and an exploration of how ECAs recognise and acclimatise to managerialist demands (Sutherland, 2015) is timely, given the impact of market-orientated policy drivers (McGettigan, 2013; Shin and Jung, 2014). The aim in this article is to relate the idea of '*identity-trajectory*' (McAlpine, Amundsen and Jazvac-Martek, 2010: 129) to the lived experience of beginning work in a national but highly-stratified HE system exhibiting high-stress and low-satisfaction (Shin and Jung, 2014). The opacity of the UK's academic probation system can

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK, this process is known as academic probation and typically lasts from 1-3 years. It differs from the US sense of probation that applies to students who are under-performing.

indicate a mismatch between Sutherland's (2015) conceptions of objective and subjective career success and induce individual behaviours that support what Ball (2003: 236) calls '*cynical compliance*'.

## The measurement culture in UK universities

Much measurement in universities is subsequently used in league tables (Times Higher Education, 2016) that reflect perceptions of increasing surveillance experienced by academics (Davies and Petersen, 2005 in an Australian context; Gill, 2009 in the UK; Grant and Elizabeth, 2015, in New Zealand). These measurements frequently focus on research – outputs, grant capture – and evolve over time. The UK was an early advocate of a 'Research Assessment Exercise' (now the Research Excellence Framework [REF]) in the 1980s, since adopted by Australia in the form of the ERA (ARC, 2015) and New Zealand's PBRF (Grant and Elizabeth, 2015). In addition to the REF, underpinning this study is a raft of other measurement technologies that vary in relation to both national HE systems and the positioning of institutions within the national hierarchy. In the UK, the Russell Group of 24 research-intensive institutions (of which the research site is one) tend to follow the processes in Table 1, but variations exist in the sector for universities which align more closely with different mission statements. For illustrative purposes, Table 1 summarises some things measured in UK HE that impact directly on early-career academics in relation to teaching and research roles; management and governance data requirements are not included as these demands commonly fall to those with different responsibilities.

Measurement Tool	Description of Purpose	Level of Granularity
Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) <sup>a</sup>	Feeds into funding formula with different activities costed at different rates; forms the basis for a university's financial allocation.	Individuals account for how they spend their time in a given period (may include weekends). Universities return aggregate data to funding agency to account for proportion of funds spent on each activity. Annual activity for all academic staff.
Research Excellence Framework (REF) <sup>a</sup>	To distribute research funding via competitive national formula.	Individuals make claims about research output and significance; departments develop submissions; institutions strategise according to current parameters. REF is every 5-7 years, but data collection a permanent feature for all academic staff (every accepted publication needs to be deposited, be peer-reviewed, journal impact factor, rating for REF categories). Published.
National Student Survey (NSS) <sup>a</sup>	To measure student satisfaction annually via unified national tool to publish league tables of performance.	Final year undergraduates provide data. Department-level and institution-level data are used internally to guide developments/policies and externally for league table claims. Related to MEQ (below). Annual activity that Academic staff must promote. Published.
Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQ) <sup>a</sup>	To measure student satisfaction at modular (course) level, usually via standard institutional instrument.	Academic staff administer for each module taught. In some institutions, academics responsible for analysing responses and creating action plans. Data collection/analysis potentially several times a year, feeds into institutional reporting mechanisms annually. Often published internally.

Programme Reports <sup>b</sup>	To assure quality, internally.	Annual report analysing admissions and performance data (includes MEQ – above, and possibly NSS data). Individuals feed to programme leader level, to faculty level.
External Examiner Reports <sup>b</sup>	To assure quality, internally/externally.	Annual report analysing processes and performance. Scrutiny at individual module (course) level, feeds forward to department/faculty. Published.
Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Review <sup>b</sup>	To assure quality, nationally.	Institutions inspected. Draws on NSS, MEQ, Programme Reports, External Examiner Reports. Every 5 years. Published.
Appraisal <sup>a</sup>	To monitor staff performance.	Individuals make claims about responsibilities/ levels of performance. Departments manage roles/responsibilities, institutions use to guide strategic developments. Annual activity for all staff.
Probation – initial <sup>c, d</sup>	To set probationary targets.	New academics set performance goals for 6, 18 month and three year intervals. Department and Faculty scrutinise. One-off activity for individuals.
Probation – mid-term <sup>c, d</sup>	To review/revise performance targets.	New academics review performance at 6 and 18 months, may revise goals. Department and Faculty scrutinise. One-off activity for individuals.
Probation – final review <sup>c, d</sup>	To monitor performance.	New academics provide evidence of meeting targets. Department and Faculty scrutinise. Continued employment confirmed or terminated, or probation extended. One-off activity for individuals.
Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) <sup>e</sup>	To promote high-quality teaching.	New process for measuring the quality of teaching using existing metrics. Potentially three-yearly exercise using institutional-level data with the intention of departmental level scrutiny in future. Full details currently being established.

<sup>a</sup> All academic staff, will include ECAs

<sup>b</sup> May include ECAs

<sup>c</sup> Exclusively for ECAs

<sup>d</sup> All institutions implement academic probation and target setting but the focus varies according to mission statements. Research-intensive HEIs privilege publication/grant capture targets.

<sup>e</sup> New requirement impacts on all staff with teaching duties.

**Table 1: an outline of possible teaching and research-related required reporting mechanisms for academics**

Universities now compete globally in recruitment terms, driven by what McGettigan (2013) calls the ‘*Great University Gamble*’: a free-market ideology that seeks to prioritise the private good (and minimise public funding) of universities. One outcome of this process is a need to measure – inputs, outputs, processes, quality – and the list is additive: in the UK, research impact, for instance, is a recent practice instantiated for the REF in 2014 and the newest demand is the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), introduced from 2016 (BIS, 2016). The extent of surveillance (Davies and Petersen, 2005) poses challenges to all, but particularly early-career academics as they establish their independent academic identities. As Shin and Jung (2014) note, implementing reforms associated with ‘New Public Management’ are clear indicators of high stress for those working in UK HE, and

this manifests itself from the beginning of the academic probation period (APP). The propensity for measurement in UK HE may be a distinct barrier for new international colleagues: the proportion of non-UK staff recruited to UK universities currently stands at 29% (HESA 2016). The importance ECAs attach to both objective and subjective measures of career success (Sutherland, 2015) suggests that the globalisation of the search for academic talent may expose new academics to '*normative prescriptions*' (Stensaker, 2015: 105) of their career trajectories that are important for policy and practice development. It is also instructive to reflect on the many measurements in higher education that originate in the UK that are subsequently exported to other geographies.

Many of the mechanisms presented in Table 1 use numerical data to form judgments, although reports, reviews and appraisals can draw on more narrative data from senior staff. For ECAs in many research-intensive institutions, however, probationary paperwork requires individuals to set out the number and quality of papers published (measured by REF rating and/or journal impact factor) and institutional policy is likely to exist on a minimum MEQ scores. These performance indicators form part of Strathern's (2000) '*audit culture*', are monitored across institutions for all academics but play an especially important role in determining appropriate performance levels (Davies and Petersen, 2005) for ECAs. **Required** reporting targets are outlined in Table 1, but there are also expectations regarding service, knowledge-exchange, outreach and impact that remain implicit.

Current conditions of academic work dictate competing priorities, as Sutherland (2015) points out, privileging compliance with managerialist demands. ECAs must, within four months of taking up post in the study university, complete a binding probationary agreement, a high-stakes process embedded within complex institutional and external policy drivers. As Shin and Jung (2014) report, measurement associated with managerial reforms are a source of stress, amplified by the probationary target-setting process. In the UK, ECAs are conscious **not** of rewards for particular behaviours (Davies and Petersen, 2005), but instead of the punitive conditions attached to not meeting targets set as part of the APP, an oppositional stance to the neoliberalised institutional culture. To explore lived experiences of ECAs subject to this complex target-setting culture, I draw on two key frameworks for the utility of their sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954), before analysing how this process feels in the UK's ever-shifting measurement culture.

## Identity-trajectory

The longitudinal work undertaken by McAlpine et al (2010) reports the generative concept of 'identity-trajectory' connecting the biographical baggage that ECAs bring with them to the perceived demands of their current contexts. This often includes significant geographical relocation (McAlpine, 2012). Given the temporal scope of probation in the UK context, and the proportion of international staff beginning their careers here, considering the impact of both institutional and individual factors in academic identity development is important. The APP works as an early conditioning mechanism, positioning those subjected to it in relation to Strathern's (2000) audit culture. The process requires all ECAs to submit themselves to very specific targets that embrace the intellectual, the institutional and the networking strands that McAlpine et al (2010) elaborate.

Intellectually, McAlpine et al (2010) foreground contribution demonstrated by artefacts, whilst Clegg (2008) and Skelton (2012) also note that biographies and values play key roles. As noted in Table 1, identities are initially required to be performed on paper in the probationary process. Individuals' experiences of novel structuring demands is related to their goal of '*intentional navigation in the*

*complexity of the academic world*' (McAlpine et al, 2010: 137) but '*affirmation*' may reside some distance from everyday lived reality and therefore not come from a professionally-significant other. Agency, in the sense of exercising control over one's direction in academic life is both '*real and imagined*' (Billot, 2010: 709) in relation to perceptions of either the immediate or the more diffuse employing context. Self-surveillance<sup>2</sup> co-exists with satisfying the '*greedy institution[s]*' (Wright et al, 2004: 144) desire for a wider gaze in complex ways where interactions are not well-understood. Intention, which in the McAlpine et al model (2010) supports the past-present-future trajectory of academic identities can thus give rise to disruptions where the measurement culture does not align with what Archer (2000: 77) calls the '*continuous sense of self*'.

The institutional emphasis is critical: as Stensaker (2015) points out, external pressures are exerted on institutional dynamics to address systemic reforms. Within this complex setting, ECAs need to interpret the demands of their new context in short order for the APP, with a more or less well-developed sense of it (Trowler and Cooper, 2002; Trowler and Knight, 1999). Resources provided at the institutional level (McAlpine et al, 2010) may favour particular activities (Skelton, 2012) or ways of being (Clegg, 2008; Davies and Petersen, 2005). For ECAs, any conflict between personal agendas and institutional priorities (Sutherland, 2015) has the potential to disempower: with limited experience and faced with an opaque process, framing appropriate ambitions can have a destabilising effect on probationers' academic identities.

Trowler and Knight (1999) emphasise the importance of the local in inducting ECAs to their new work contexts and this notion of networking is taken up by McAlpine et al (2010) and extended to include the inter/national, an important point given how many academic staff are globally mobile. For probationers, particularly those immediately post-PhD, these networks will include previous supervisors – with whom they now need to compete for funding – mentors, and other recent doctoral graduates who face similar challenges but in differing contexts. The variability of academic practices within an institution (Smith, 2010) can render any advice from outside sources commonly available to ECAs, however well-meaning, problematic.

## Teaching and learning regimes

ECAs, as Trowler and Knight (1999: 178) suggest, join a specific '*cultural configuration*' of academic practices, shaped by local discourses, some of which may appear alien or troublesome (Perkins, 2008) but are vitally important to the probationer wanting to 'fit in' to their new department. The immediate network for ECAs is, then, what Trowler and Cooper (2002: 221) characterise as a '*Teaching and Learning Regime*' (TLR) with its '*constellation of rules, assumptions, practices and relationships*' to be acquired and demonstrated to the satisfaction of an as yet not necessarily well-understood 'other' who controls the probationary process. TLRs (Trowler and Cooper, 2002) feature eight '*components*' concerned with highly-situated academic practices: identities in interaction; power relations; codes of signification; tacit assumptions; rules of appropriateness; recurrent practices; discursive repertoires; and implicit theories of learning and teaching. As Trowler and Cooper (2002) caution, these components form a dynamic whole and disaggregating them is wise only for analytic purposes. For this reason, only three of these '*moments*' (Trowler, 2008: 51) are of most interest in this article – power relations, discursive repertoires and codes of signification – as

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<sup>2</sup> I'm grateful to a (deliberately unnamed) participant for seeing this in an earlier discussion of the findings long before I did.

they are particularly illuminative in understanding the process of probationary target-setting for ECAs but the evidence presented below can also be read against other 'moments' with ease.

Power relations exist in every educational setting but in UK universities are communicated to ECAs in at least two potentially conflicting ways: the discursive repertoires and recurrent practices within an academic department (Trowler and Cooper, 2002), and through the institutional structures imposed by the probationary process (Smith, 2010). The first channel of communication is subject to perceptions of local power hierarchies, whilst the second is represented by the measurement imperatives outlined in Table 1, which also form a basis for the discursive repertoires available to ECAs. Overt surveillance (Davies and Petersen, 2005) makes clear what is valued and how it needs to be represented. The measurement regime induces a particular form of performativity (Ball, 2003) for individuals, departments and institutions, not necessarily well-aligned as Billot (2010) suggests. Complex forms of identities and practices can be seen to be reducible to crude measurements that can be interpreted in various ways. The language implicit in measurement tools can thus challenge discursive repertoires employed at multiple levels (Trowler and Cooper, 2002), including the values-base (Skelton, 2012) that individuals bring to academic work.

Taking the ideas of power, language, practices and relationships further, Trowler and Cooper (2002: 228) posit '*codes of signification*' as a constellation of factors influencing '*dispositions in the attribution of meaning and emotion*'. For ECAs establishing independent academic identities, codes of signification manifest themselves in the probationary agreement. Measurable targets must be specified in paperwork common to every department or faculty, unrelated to disciplinary and other local nuances (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Trowler and Cooper, 2002; Trowler and Knight, 1999). The goal-setting objective of probation thus becomes divorced from local academic practices: there is a minor focus on citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007), emphasis on more easily countable research outputs (Wilsdon, 2015), and a standard form of teaching evaluation via the MEQ (see Table 1). From the earliest days of an academic career, indulging in quantifying the self is an institutional requirement and a process that does not engage with affective dimensions of academic work (Clegg, 2008) or take account of an ethos of care (Lynch, 2010). Measurement in academic life in the form of probationary target-setting for ECAs thus legitimises particular behaviours that connect to Shin and Jung's (2014) categorisation of UK HE as a high-stress environment.

## Exploring ECAs' experiences

Volunteers for this study were sought from an ECA population with recent experience of the target-setting process in a research-intensive university. Six Social Scientists (from a population representing many disciplines) came forward. Narrative-style interviews (Riessman, 2008) were undertaken with the gender-balanced sample. The fine-grained and contextually-sensitive nature of the data gathered gives rise to serious ethical considerations: individuals' experiences are unique, but institutions indulge in practices that may easily identify them. For this reason, echoing Hemer (2014), I used an inductive approach to thematising interview responses, and present only limited direct quotation below. Extensive extracts risk identification, not only of participants, but non-participant others implicated in probationers' narratives (Mattingly, in Riessman, 2008) though this may lead to a charge of over-interpretation. Analysis sought evidence of the existence of power relations, discursive repertoires (Trowler and Cooper, 2002) and the concomitant affective dimensions (Clegg, 2008) of academic identity-trajectory (McAlpine et al, 2010) drawn from literature work. Beginning academics bring with them biographies and sets of practices learned



elsewhere, and must fit these to their new cultural configurations (Trowler and Knight, 1999) as best they can.

The uniqueness of individual accounts cautions us against extrapolating 'truths' from such accounts, but Polkinghorne (1995: 12-15) makes an important distinction between '*narrative analysis*' where stories are the outcome of research, and '*analysis of narratives*', where common themes may be discerned. Following the latter approach, data are presented here from an analysis of a small number of richly-detailed accounts gathered from an '*experience-centred narrative*' (Squire, 2008: 41) perspective. The process of target-setting was the focus of interview encounters with individuals with very recent experience of satisfying the APP regime. This approach does not dwell on concrete events, but seeks instead to explore how ECAs are '*imbricated in narrative*' (Squire, 2008: 43) as they seek to develop their academic identity-trajectories (McAlpine et al, 2010) within unfamiliar TLRs (Trowler and Cooper, 2002), bringing diverse biographies and experiential learning moments to bear on a rigid institutional structure.

The unit of analysis is the co-constructed narrative (Riessman, 2008) as ECAs interact with the interviewer. The focus here is on key messages, the 'what' of probationary experience that the narrator wished to communicate (Riessman, 2008) whose import is marked in particular emphases in interview encounters. What is foregrounded is influenced by pre-existing theoretical constructs available to participants and interviewer in relation to purpose. Though promising to take an hour of their time, most interviews lasted longer than this as participants were keen to situate their experiences in ways that '*traverse temporal and geographical space*' (Riessman, 2008: 23): they recognise their contributions as in part stemming from their backgrounds, but also located firmly in the cycle of preparing and having approved their probationary paperwork. The 'badge' of 'approval' came to be significant in the analysis though I am mindful that the audience for a narrative (Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2008) influences its production. The aim here is to represent, rather than generalise, and in the analysis I try to reflect this by giving voice to ECAs' experiences though the interpretations are mine alone.

The sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954) present in the literature review for this article were not the starting point for analysis but, in interrogating interview data, it became clear that TLRs (Trowler and Cooper, 2002), identity-trajectory (McAlpine et al, 2010) and the very specific measurement culture (Shin and Jung, 2014) engendered by the probationary regime were keenly felt. As can be seen by the quote that opens this article, the idea of measurement as it currently operates does not sit well: '*bad measurement*' or dissonance (Smith, 2010) permeate interview talk that is ill at ease, as Macfarlane (2007) suggests, with any notion of contemporary collegiate academic identities. Within and across interview readings, the powerful technologies of TLRs and measurement emerged and this shapes the analysis that follows.

Small, institutionally-based samples need to be humble in their claims, although this does not make them untrustworthy. As we try to get at what matters in the probationary experience, what 'counts' came to dominate interview encounters. I hope what follows does not '*essentialise*' or '*other*' (Cousin, 2006) ECAs as particular performative subjects (Ball, 2003) and instead serves to liberate rather than domesticate which Land (2004: 177-179) expresses as the desire to either critique or comply with a dominant culture that - when applied to ECAs - what matters is to design intellectually productive and achievable individual aspirations. To this end, the next section draws

from participants' testimony on the three sensitising elements of Trowler and Cooper's (2002) TLRs elaborated earlier and subsequently McAlpine et al's (2010) notion of identity-trajectory, before closing comments on how academic identities are coming to be shaped by the practices of the measured university.

### **Power relations: policy and the personal**

The structure provided by an institution's probationary policy works mostly, in effect, as a stricture in its archaic sense of 'binding tightly'. Trowler and Knight (1999) argue strongly against technical-rationalist models of induction but the distance between formal, collective probationary requirements and the notion of belonging in academic life remains. The narratives explored in this section vivify, with two exceptions, the gap between institutional beliefs in the process of socialisation and the lived experiences of those subjected to it. The local locus of control and informality that Trowler and Knight (1999) advocate is yet to be realised:

*As a PhD student I never had the feeling of making the wrong choices but here I have that daily. If I spend time doing this, am I doing the right thing? Do "they" – I don't formulate "they" as a person – think I should be doing something else? (F)*

The surveillance technology of the probationary process is disembodied and in some ways dehumanised:

*...you have this rigmarole of ticking boxes which means setting unambitious targets, it's not very inspiring but you don't want to be a "hostage to fortune", I was warned off of that. (F)*

"They" – representing a research-intensive institution with global aspirations – assert that they want ambitious targets in the three traditional areas of academic practice outlined in the probationary paperwork (research, education, citizenship) but the probationary process appears to operate in a climate of fear and uncertainty influenced by a highly-individualised (Macfarlane, 2007) and non-caring culture (Lynch, 2010) that may be interpreted in gendered ways:

*It all becomes an exercise in following a performative script... (M)*

These contrasting positions illustrate the power of the probationary target-setting process as either antithetical to both intellectual and institutional agendas, or as simply a game to be played. There appears to be no concrete reconciliation between organisational rhetoric (Stensaker, 2015) shaped by the measurement culture of external policy drivers and individuals' personal aspirations suggested by Billot (2010) as a way forward in an increasingly-commodified higher education environment (McGettigan, 2013). The implications of this dichotomy are explored further below. Closing the gap between institutional-individual goals (Billot, 2010) is the work of examining the immediate work environment that ECAs join, most often characterised by departments or schools; vision and leadership at this level inculcate particular cultures and practices that use existing expertise productively or otherwise (Macfarlane, 2007).

### **Discursive repertoires: the language of fitting in**

*Everyone has been so nice (F)*

The probationary procedure communicates institutional wishes and desires but local practices influence socialisation processes in particular ways (Trowler and Cooper, 2002), some of which align

more positively than others. I argue that probationary academics join highly-situated TLRs (Trowler and Cooper, 2002) rather than distant and perceived bureaucratic institutions: departmental discourses and interactions are important in shaping individuals' practices and aspirations. Any distance between '*espoused theories*' and '*theories in use*' (Schon, 1984) has the potential to induce anxieties in the probationary process. How '*nice*' colleagues are (locally) and the need to fit in with their practices does not translate easily to the perception of sterile institutional requirements:

*The 3 years is difficult because it's not in your control, no-one can tell you what you're going to be doing, how many students, what courses, admin roles. You have to **trust** people what they tell you and I struggled with that.* (F, my emphasis)

*It [the probationary paperwork] got rejected because I didn't set an MEQ [module evaluation questionnaire] target because it's team-taught but I got explicitly asked to include that and that really annoyed me because I don't want to be appraised on a measure that doesn't appraise **my** work, it's annoying and I felt, I did not need this shit...* (M, my emphasis)

The locus of control in these quotes is firmly rooted in individuals' perceptions of their own practice: they want to 'own' the means of judgment, but it is striking how strongly this emphasis on individuation misaligns with current practices. '*Trusting*' others, and recognising contributions – '*there is now some differentiation in the questions to separate out the teaching strands...*' (M) – present clear challenges to the formation of academic identities for ECAs located in departments that espouse their institution's focus on quantifying selves (Davies and Petersen, 2005). Conflicting messages are prevalent in the processes of academic probation that give rise to difficulties for ECAs. Trowler and Cooper (2002) summarise neatly a longstanding preoccupation with the psychologised individual as the unit for analysis in professional development programmes common in the UK which contradicts what they recognise as far more socially-situated and relational work contexts (see also Sutherland, 2015). This is a paradox that plays itself out in the academic probationary period and is recognised, if not actually resolved, by the discursive repertoires that ECAs join.

Clegg's (2008: 343) notion of '*principled, personal autonomy*' is absent from these accounts in exchange for compliance with institutionally-decreed alternative visions of the '*teacher's soul*' (Ball, 2003). Billot's (2010) argument for a closer alignment of institutional and individual goals is available to only two participants in this study, both male, who appear to have access to powerful resources:

*Oh that [probationary target setting] was very straightforward because I've got a very experienced mentor who knows what's required.* (M)

*I was told to scratch the first year because it'll run away with you, you spend it getting to know how things work...* (M)

Mentors, for these male academics, include professors in their respective departments and the power of local discourses is acknowledged. In contrast, the female academic whose quote opens this section has been appointed two female mentors, one of whom has only recently been promoted to Senior Lecturer level. The male academic who contests his department's practices about team-taught judgments refers openly to having a recently-promoted female professor as his mentor. This is not to suggest that particular mentors take their roles any less seriously than others – but does perhaps trouble the notion that equitable access to resources (material and discursive) – may

proceed along gendered lines. Lynch argues (2010) that caring responsibilities are influential and here – whether these manifest through personal circumstances or by institutional stereotype – can be traced through the language in use in these responses: either trust in others, or a bridling at co-ownership in relation to target-setting.

### Codes of signification: challenges to identity-development

*Well, its scholarly schizophrenia isn't it? (M)*

This comment was not meant to offend: it simply illustrates an increasingly commonplace experience of academic life where probationary lecturers find themselves positioned by an institutional discourse that they are well-placed to critique, but find far harder to escape:

*Everyone knows it's a management technology but then they tell you, be careful what you promise because it's a legal relationship and how you say things and it makes you less ambitious, I think. (F)*

The target-setting nature of the APP can be disempowering, an example of what Morrish (2015) portrays as 'anticipatory audits' and 'demands for post-hoc justification.' The link to an audit culture (Strathern, 2000) is clear. A constant focus on the required reporting mechanisms sketched in Table 1 as examples of institutional accountability legitimises a particular form of academic identity:

*I got asked whether my form could be used as an example by the Head of Department. This is my first proper job so I don't know what's important but it shouldn't be targets, it should be ambitions... The notion of tying me down to things I need to show in three years' time is obnoxious to me because it precludes other opportunities. (M)*

A culture of conformity is now being produced in UK universities that supports Billot's (2010) challenge of more closely aligning individual and institutional objectives. Rather than furthering a notion of 'working in concert' (Billot, 2010: 720) however, the experiences from most participants in this study suggest instead that this process of alignment disempowers and constrains ECAs. Whilst academic probation is a long-standing process in UK universities, it is not a static instrument. There is evidence of a creeping incrementalism:

*I submitted 3 weeks ago and got revisions from the HoD as the new guidelines came out so I needed to change my paperwork and re-submit. (F)*

The 'code of signification' (Trowler and Cooper, 2002) is clearly interpreted here – by both Head of Department and probationer – as a domesticating agenda (Land, 2004) or a 'management technology' in the participant's words. The historical tripartite academic role that Macfarlane (2007) argued was being eroded is now fragmented (Macfarlane, 2016) under the weight of target-setting. Skelton (2012) uses this notion of fragmentation to illustrate how a changing values-base can alienate some academics, whilst McGettigan (2013) and Stensaker (2015) show how institutional identities become more pressing in a competitive market. Reconciling the institutional-individual as Billot (2010) recommends becomes harder with every additional demand placed on academics and ideas of measuring, monitoring and care raise pressing questions for ECAs explored in the following section.

## Identity-trajectory

The autonomy of probationary academics is recognised in their pursuit of goal-setting behaviours provided that these are congruent with the wider surveillance economy (Davies and Petersen, 2005). An accommodative local ethos may be superseded by bureaucratic superstructures which can undermine the three elements of identity-trajectory development: intellectual; institutional; and networking posited by McAlpine et al, 2010. Personal aspirations – and the intention to do meaningful work – were strongly expressed by participants in this study. Similar to their Canadian counterparts reported in McAlpine et al (2010), the interdependence of their personal research agendas, networks and new institutional homes was recognised, and the potential to build on previous relationships noted. However, the overt target-setting culture militates against exploring what should be a productive temporal dimension of academic identity formation:

*It makes you very individualistic... I didn't put in any joint publications [as targets] with previous colleagues because that doesn't depend on me. (F)*

*I'm incredulous that someone would expect me to set targets that far in advance without being able to interact with them... I'm not sure whether it's a system of surveillance or a system for career development, that's not entirely clear. (M)*

*I know I need to develop my networks, but how do you do that? (F)*

These are painful narratives. The strictures of probationary target-setting required by institutions constrain the ambitions of the early-career academics they purport to support. The local, as argued for by Trowler and Knight (1999) is usurped by a perceived wider gaze: *'I assume, metaphorically, that it's the DVC [Deputy Vice-Chancellor] but there's someone behind that...'* said one female respondent, assigning power some distance from the *'cultural configuration'* (Trowler and Knight, 1999) of the department. All but one of the participants was within months of gaining their doctorates, often seen as a time of significant intellectual growth, independence and contribution, but perceptions of satisfying the measurement culture embedded in the probationary agenda negated such explorations.

Personal responsibility does not appear to be a problem – participants commonly voiced an aspiration to *'be the best I can'* – but ambition and risk, touchstones of significant research, are rejected in favour of the *'unambitious'* (F) and the safe: *'if you've got something in the bag, put it in...'* (M). Inducing defensive responses or game-playing strategies are presumably not the intention behind institutional policies, though this appears to be the effect on some ECAs. The nature of the probationary target-setting process emphasises individuation (Macfarlane, 2007) and induces a reluctance to develop new networks or further enhance existing ones as probationary targets. The self-censorship of relationship-building of the intellectual kind appears to preclude serendipitous opportunities in deference to required managerialist box-ticking, potentially constraining fulfilment in identity-trajectory (McAlpine et al., 2010) work.

## Probationary tensions: domestication or liberation?

The academic probationary process serves many purposes in the measurement culture of UK universities: in the study site, the APP privileges research (outputs and income) but also functions to regulate teaching performance through MEQ scores and mandating professional development (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). Targets are also required in relation to citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007),

but the university-wide surveillance instrument is silent on issues of care (Lynch, 2010), networking (McAlpine et al, 2010) and personal investment (Clegg, 2008). More personally-focused intellectual and networking strands of McAlpine et al's (2010) model are subsumed by the institutional mores highlighted by Shin and Jung's (2014) assertion of the high-stress UK HE environment, or Sutherland's (2015) concern with the tension between objective and subjective measures of career success. Agentic energy is devoted to avoiding failure in meeting 'unambitious' APP targets.

Rather than a tool of liberation, where ambitions can be expressed, the probationary process operates as a compliance-inducing domesticating technology (Land, 2004). ECAs censor themselves in relation to targets, not wishing to be judged against goals outside their personal control, giving rise to the paradox of a measurement culture that begets not itself, but its antithesis. For many respondents, ambition – emancipatory critique in Land's (2004: 179) conceptualisation – is curtailed and a domestication that '*emphasizes adherence to expressed policy*' (Land, 2004: 179) – or in this case, very specific targets – prevails. ECAs submit to a '*normative... naturalizing and legitimizing*' (Land, 2004: 189) effect. Each iteration of the institution's probationary guidelines predictably call for ever greater measures of performance: higher MEQ scores, larger grants, the promise of increased research productivity. Under such circumstances, academic identity-trajectories prove problematic as intellectual, individual and networking aspirations (McAlpine et al, 2010) are subordinated to meeting performative demands. The punitive framing of performance management (Shin and Jung, 2014) sends messages about the value of particular activities (Hemer, 2014) for ECAs seeking to understand new work environments.

A very real sense of visibility and monitoring are palpable and position ECAs in ever-more intricate webs of performativity. Simultaneously, in this sample, ECAs express their concerns over limiting their horizons but not their ultimate ambitions, in pursuit of compliance with the domesticating regime of the APP. It is hard to see how the current framework for measurement in UK universities supports ECAs in their goals if they fear the domesticating repercussions that result from not satisfying a distant – and disembodied – 'other'. Ball's (2003: 236) '*cynical compliance*' comes to the fore in the testimony here: as institutions privilege an increasingly narrow sense of target-setting, they undermine their own marketisation ambitions.

The performative culture acknowledged by many authors is writ large in the determination to maximise league table visibility by universities. In practice, however, the 'conformative subject' emerges who frustrates institutional ambition by privileging agentic desires, illustrating the limitations of particular forms of measurement. '*Bad measurement...*' cannot induce behaviours valued by corporatised universities in response to the continuing sense of economic imperative (BIS, 2016) rewarded by successive neoliberal government agendas. Re-introducing an element of trust in the work contract between universities and their academics has the potential to reinvigorate motivation towards a productive identity-trajectory for ECAs. Further domestication through widely-applied targets has the potential, it appears, to satisfy a measurement culture at the expense of a much-needed growth one.

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